Oklahoma State Auditor & Inspector

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TO GOVERNOR MARY FALLIN:

The Oklahoma Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA) exists to serve one of the most revered populations within our state: our honored veterans of military service. This state agency performs a wide variety of services for Oklahoma veterans and their families, from assisting with filing benefit claims to providing residential care. The agency's sole mission is to provide *excellent* health services and long-term skilled care. It is apparent that a high quality of care is evident in selected aspects of ODVA's operations, but many ODVA practices fall short of the standard of quality that its constituents deserve and to which they are entitled.

Questionable ODVA practices, such as inconsistent training, pervasive substandard wages, and some administrators' disregard for staff input, have contributed to a problematic work environment where human resources are not properly allocated or valued. Furthermore, the veteran centers' decentralized structure, originally designed to promote accountability, causes inconsistent policy implementation and insufficient independence in performance of internal investigations involving alleged misconduct. These issues could be either effectively managed or altogether avoided with appropriate oversight by ODVA's governing board, the War Veterans Commission (the Commission), but commissioners neither appear fully aware of their own governance responsibilities nor conscious of their own deficiencies.

Excellence in service delivery should permeate every aspect of ODVA operations, from Commission governance to the daily care afforded by the nursing staff. Veterans who live at the centers call these facilities *home* and trust the staff to aptly manage many aspects of their lives. However, despite the fact that these residents have all served our country during times of war, not every center guarantees resident veterans some of the most basic provisions, such as a clean set of sheets on the weekend or an appropriate response to a complaint of alleged abuse. These deficiencies in essential services hardly seem a suitable way to repay those who have sacrificed to protect the rest of us and will likely spend the remainder of their lives in such conditions.

Though a number of programs may have been ineffectively governed, the current Commission appears to have taken some action toward the betterment of our veterans. Such initiatives include the recent appointment of a full-time deputy director to oversee daily operations. However, there remain abundant opportunities to further advance and maintain consistent high quality service delivery for current and future veteran residents.

Our audit provides several recommendations detailing how the Commission may overcome its challenges and institute incentives that promote operational consistency and accountability, yet these merely represent a "starting point" for ODVA. A unique opportunity exists to positively alter the agency's culture to one of active participation and thoughtful discussion, rather than of apathy and disengagement. A cultural shift will better position the Commission and the agency to successfully achieve its mission of providing *excellent* health services to our veterans now and for many years to come.

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